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# On Paul Ricoeur's Unwritten Project of an *Ontology of Place*

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## Abstract

*In this paper I would like to venture certain assumptions on what could be a consequential ontology of place, as sketched from a – probably unconventional and somewhat free – reading of Ricoeur's debate with Heidegger's Sein und Zeit on the subject of temporality, resumed in the third part of La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli. The challenge is now to try to conceive of an ontology of place at the same level as the ontology of historicity, which Ricoeur begins to unfold in the way I have identified.*

**Key-words:** Space, Place, Memory, History

## 1. Entrance

The surprising subtitle of *Interpreting Nature*, a 2004 book edited by F. Clingerman, B. Treanor, M. Drenthen, and D. Utsler, announces the 'emergent field of environmental hermeneutics' (Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen, Utsler, 2014). In its most robust sense, the editors argue, this "new" field of hermeneutic research should be understood as 'a philosophical stance which understands how the inevitability of what Gadamer called our 'hermeneutical consciousness' informs our relationship with environments' (4). More precisely, this field of research

is organized around a double fundamental concern: the application of hermeneutic principles to the interpretation of environments (natural, cultural, territorial, political, historical, etc.) where human life *takes place*, and research into an ontological framework for interpreting the human way of mediating the meaning of *place*.

Whether we should speak of this as an “emergent field” rather than a constitutive dimension of hermeneutics is open to debate. Yet the interest of this kind of proposal – one that calls attention to *environments* and, consequently, to the *spatial side* of the human condition – is unquestionable. In this paper, I would like to discuss a specific part of Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical project, where he offers us decisive suggestions for how to conceive of a hermeneutic account of human space. I will focus my analysis on selected sections in *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, with the aim of trying to understand (with Ricoeur, but also beyond Ricoeur) the importance of concepts such as space, place, environment, architecture, and urbanism in the context of Ricoeur’s philosophical project.

## **2. Emplacements**

It is in *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* that Ricoeur, talking about the “spatial side” (Ricoeur, 2004: 148) of the relation between memory and history, clearly proposes that three irreducible axes of a “hermeneutic rationalization” of the idea of place are central to his analysis. The first is the axis of a “phenomenology of place”, which Ricoeur locates in the works of E. Casey, whose analysis is indebted to M. Merleau-Ponty’s revolutionary work on the body’s lived spatiality. The second axis is

developed by a 'hermeneutic of the built space'<sup>1</sup> insofar as Ricoeur, in a very interesting paper titled 'Architecture et narrativité' (Ricoeur, 1998: 44–51) 'tried to transpose to the architectural plane the categories linked to threefold mimesis in the first volume of [...] *Time and Narrative*: prefiguration, configuration, refiguration' (Ricoeur, 2004: 527n). Finally, according to Ricoeur, a higher level of rationalization of place, which we might call the axis of a "*long duration*" geo-politics of inhabited land, is unfolded by examining the question of whether geography might be to space as history is to time (in the same sense that narrative and architecture are analogous and mutually corresponding ways of accessing and creating human time and human space, respectively). Following the original idea of a "geo-history" (suggested by Vidal de la Blanch and pursued by the momentous developments of the *School of the Annals*) up to the point where it changes into a geo-politics of *long duration* (exemplified in Braudel's works on the Mediterranean), Ricoeur is here interested in the way lived space is reconstructed (by relations of commerce, by political projects, military endeavours, agricultural choices, types of communities, ethnic traditions, religious habits, etc.) at the hyper-geometrical level of the "*oikoumene*"<sup>2</sup>.

It is precisely at this point of his analysis that Ricoeur adds the following provocative and surprising suggestion: 'One could pursue this

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<sup>1</sup> I have studied several philosophical variations of the first two axes in: Umbelino, 2016; Id., 2016a; Id., 2013; Id., 2011.

<sup>2</sup> 'In conclusion, from the phenomenology of "places" that beings of flesh and blood occupy, leave, lose, rediscover — in passing through the intelligibility belonging to architecture — up to the geography that describes an inhabited space, the discourse of space too has traced out an itinerary thanks to which lived space is turn by turn abolished by geometrical space and reconstructed at the hyper-geometrical level of the *oikoumene*' (Ricoeur, 2004: 153).

odyssey of turn by turn lived, constructed, traversed, and inhabited space by an ontology of 'place,' at the same level as the ontology of historicity that we shall consider in part 3 of this work' (582n). What might such an ontology be?

The expression "at the same level" is in my view crucial: it would be fairly safe to begin by saying that Ricoeur is suggesting that both an ontology of place and an ontological hermeneutics addressed to the historical condition come together in 'any attempt to characterize the mode of being that we are, in each case in opposition to the mode of being characterizing beings other than ourselves, whatever the ultimate relation of this being to Being may be' (344). Given that the *mode of being that we are* is characterized both by the "power to remember" (*Ib.*)(*pouvoir faire mémoire*) and the ability to "write" history, it could be added that *spatiality* (in the broad sense of the fabric of *environments and places*) is as fundamental to and constitutive of our historical fabric – understood as *res gestae et historia rerum gestarum*<sup>3</sup> – as *temporality*. But how so?

Allow me to venture certain assumptions on what could be a consequential ontology of place, as sketched from a – probably unconventional and somewhat free – reading of Ricoeur's debate with Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* on the subject of temporality, resumed in the third part of *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*<sup>4</sup>. It is a complex discussion: Ricoeur does not hide his debt to Heidegger, yet it seems that he somehow takes that debt as a philosophical motive to clearly show,

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<sup>3</sup> 'We make history and we make histories because we are historical' (349).

<sup>4</sup> It is of course true that very few thinkers have thought profoundly about the nature of place more than Heidegger; I believe, however, that our thoughts on place can profit from Ricoeur's controversial assessment.

despite his closeness to Heidegger, his “reservations” regarding key aspects of *Sein und Zeit*.

An initial point of disagreement has to do with what Ricoeur considers to be, at the centre of Heidegger’s existential analytic of *Dasein* (and regarding his famous analysis of the concept of care) an insufficient account of the importance of a ‘very particular existential that is the flesh, the animate body, my own body, as Husserl had begun to develop this notion in his last works in line with the Fifth Cartesian Meditation’ (345). This notion is decisive for developing a meditation on death and birth, but most of all in accounting for “the between” upon which Heidegger constructs his idea of historicity. In this sense, according to Ricoeur, only the development of an analysis of our incarnated way of being can help us to understand this “between”, as it entails ‘bridging the logical gulf hollowed out by the hermeneutics of *Dasein* between the existentials gravitating around the centre of care and the categories in which the modes of being of things’, objectively present (*vorhanden*) or handy (*zunhanden*), ‘are related’ (*Ib.*).

A second precaution taken by Ricoeur regarding Heidegger’s analysis has to do with the following central idea, developed in *Being and Time* (an idea that Ricoeur himself shares): the notion that time is a metacategory of the same order as care, in keeping with a philosophical anthropology of the capable human being. As Ricoeur puts it, ‘[c]are is temporal, and time is the time of care’ (346). The problem is that time, in philosophical terms, has always been a source of aporetic discourses, and it is not guaranteed that Heidegger’s critique of the “vulgar” category of time is sufficient to overcome those aporetic perspectives in favour of a conception of authentic human temporality. Ricoeur’s solution is, as I have discussed elsewhere (see *apud* n. 4), to

consider narrative as a way of accessing “human time”, only to be found at the point or rupture and suture between lived time and cosmological time.

A third worry concerns Heidegger's thought-provoking choice to place the main accent of his approach on the future and not on the present. ‘Under the province of care, in Heidegger, ‘being ahead of oneself’ becomes the pole of reference for the entire analysis of temporality, with its heroic connotation of “anticipatory resoluteness”’ (Ricoeur, 2004: 347) and its focus on being-towards-death. One can, nevertheless, according to Ricoeur, resist the hierarchizing of time that comes along with the suggestion that an orientation toward the future would be ‘more authentic and more original’ (348) than an orientation toward the past and the present. It is Heidegger's concept of authenticity that is clearly at stake here, and more precisely its auto-referential dimension, which Ricoeur is trying to dismiss in order to think of historicity without privileging any one dimension of time over the others.

In fact – and this is a fourth consideration made by Ricoeur regarding Heidegger's analysis – in addition to the new manner of ordering the threefold division of temporal experience, Heidegger proposes ‘an original hierarchical ordering of the modes of temporalization’ (*Ib.*), starting from the future and going back to the past, understood as a progressive loss of ‘authenticity’, as a ‘descent from the authentic to the inauthentic’ (Jervolino, 2002: 63). Ricoeur does not share this perspective as he considers that what Heidegger calls ‘authenticity here lacks any criterion of intelligibility’ (Ricoeur, 2004: 349) and remains but a self-referential term. By contrast, Ricoeur proposes a conception of the equal dignity of the three instances and

levels of time, as expressing the potentialities of the embodied and intersubjective capable human being.

This is the only way, Ricoeur argues, to overcome the confrontation between the ontology of historical being and the epistemology of history, something that Heidegger's discourse, 'succumbing to what Adorno denounced as the *jargon of authenticity*' (*Ib.*), does not allow. Heidegger could have saved himself from this jargon, which tends to couple "authenticity" with the "primordial", 'if by historical condition he was to understand, in accordance with what the expression suggests, an existential condition of the possibility of the entire series of discourses concerning the historical in general, in everyday life, in fiction, and in history' (*Ib.*). If we make history and we make histories, this is precisely 'because we are historical'; this is the 'because of existential conditionality' upon which it is finally possible to 'organize an order of derivation that would not be reduced to a progressive loss of ontological density but that would be marked by increasing determination on the side of epistemology' (*Ib.*). In other words, in each confrontation between the ontology of the historical condition and the historical knowledge that intersects with a phenomenology of memory, it is always possible to find the prospect of a *riposte* to the law of mortal inevitability as primordially authentic. Ricoeur's suggestion here is of a 'humble alternative of the meaning of mortality in which the reference to one's own body requires a detour through biology and the return to the self by way of a patient appropriation of a knowledge entirely outside of the mere fact of death' (350): a knowledge of birth, of the gift of life, of the resilience against the wounds of existence, of the ties of solidarity and recognition. This possibility can finally pave the way for a true historical awareness of the presence of death (of the self, of those close

to us, and among all these others, the dead of the past) in life. In the face of this philosophical possibility, a new positive dialogue with historical knowledge is made possible, as the privileged retrospective gaze of history offers to the absent ones of history 'the pity of an offer of burial'<sup>5</sup>. But this can only be so at the difficult point where memory and history meet, only to mutually temper one another with regards to their hegemonic temptations<sup>6</sup>.

### **3. The ontology of place**

The challenge is now to try to conceive of *an ontology of place at the same level as the ontology of historicity*, which Ricoeur begins to unfold in the way I have identified.

Let us return to the suggestion that the existential of flesh, of the lived body, should have been deepened by Heidegger. Such a needed development would imply, in my view, the symmetrical development of an analysis of the spatial fabric of place in a double sense: first, as the dimension that constitutes itself around bodies and permeates each dynamic way of belonging to the world; but also, and foremost, as the genetic condition of the *Da* of *Dasein*, as it were. We are the sort of embodied being-in-the-world that we are – the sort of manipulating, thinking, remembering, experiencing, embodied creatures in-the-world

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<sup>5</sup> 'The equation between writing and sepulchre would thus be proposed as the reply furnished by the discourse of the historian to the discourse of the philosopher' (Ricoeur 2004: 351).

<sup>6</sup> 'On the one hand, history would like to reduce memory to the status of one object among others in its field of investigation; on the other hand, collective memory opposes its resources of commemoration to the enterprise of neutralizing lived significations under the distant gaze of the historian. Under conditions of retrospection common to history and to memory the contest of priority is undecidable. It is this very undecidability that is accounted for in an ontology responsible for its epistemic counterpart' (*Ib.*).



that we are – only in virtue of our active *engagement in place* (Malpas, 2004: 177) and, conversely, in virtue of what places themselves, as they become significant densifications of space, contribute to our *way of being* involved in those places.

In this sense we might say that spatiality, as the possibility of *emplacement*, is a primordial dimension in which all aspects of human engagement in the world are actively rooted and can be unfolded: the mediation of one's own identity, the relationship between different human beings, the relationship between humans and things of the world – all these connections are originally *negotiated* with the dense structure of places. If our way of *capably* being-in-the-world is to some extent assured by our embodied connectedness to specific places, and if the *homo capax* is "capable of making memory", it must be added that the link we are talking about is also one that operates in memory and, consequently, in history (that is to say, in time) at a radical level: we do not remember ourselves or other people merely as abstract meanings or ideas of actions and decisions; we *remember* them (individually or collectively) as being *emplaced*. The people we remember are what they are *because* of their way of inhabiting, their way of belonging, their way of *making place* for themselves – but also, crucially, because of the ways in which the dynamics of place themselves materialize meaning and allow history to account for it, thus contributing to *making* each person, action or event who or what it *is*.

If this is so, an ontology of place must then – and this is a second clue I would like to suggest – include research into an "authentic" conception of space. This research must – like Ricoeur's research into human time – surpass the aporetic perspectives on space that tend to elude the point of rupture and suture, where "human space" (as a third

space between lived space and geometrical space) can truly be found. This research will confirm that it is *the fabric of built spaces* that forges the *places* we dwell. Ricoeur has shown quite convincingly the sense in which architecture and urbanism (civil, military) *create* the places we live in, that is to say where human time, in its historical and existential modes, *takes place*. Be it a building, a city, or a natural landscape that has been shaped by human actions, it is the human act of building in a broad sense that can change geological environments into meaningful lived or inhabited places *in place*. Therefore, something similar to what is said of the capacity for an ontology of temporality must be said of the spatial dimension of human dwelling when it comes to making possible (in an existential sense) the representation of the past by history and, before that, by memory (Ricoeur, 2004: 350): such an alignment, I would like to argue, will first of all show that the existential possibility of remembering is both temporal *and spatial* in the sense that no identity, no person, no action, no event of the past, and no time gone by *is* what it *was* outside the place that made it what it was. This means that the spatial dimension we are talking about is neither a psychological one nor a simple conception of localization in an inert positive extension. What I am arguing here is that any sense of the past implies the spatial dimension of emplacement, in the sense that the recuperation of the past by memory and, following that, by history equally needs a *sense of place*.

This being so, a further dimension of an ontology of place can be unfolded following Ricoeur's suggestion of "not privileging any dimension of time over the others": to have a *sense of place* is, in fact, to understand all dimensions of time as equally authentic. In this way, we might say that "being-towards-a-place" is never the same as *being-*

*towards-death*. Starting with the originality of *belonging* or being *for somewhere* means that any *sense of time* respects to situated, remembering persons as they interact within specific multi-layered spaces and particular locations, with concrete and material objects, environments, intersubjective relations and mundane *presences*. In this sense, to be *emplaced* is never merely to point to one dimension of time, because each place maintains our connection to several layers of being in the world. In place we are *at home*, and *at home*, in places that combine and connect *several times*, we *build* our lives (sometimes *over our dead*), we resist the wounds of existence, we make *space* in life for “our” dead and, *at the same time*, we celebrate each birth.

The concreteness of places sustains the equal authenticity of all the dimensions of time, and for any situated individual a *sense of the past* will not be detached from the way in which present and future actions sometimes seem to be embedded in a complex history of old emplacements and ways of inhabiting. This is why we might say that – another clue – it is at the level of an ontology of place that the grounds for a point of intersection are first sketched, where memory and history meet and *mutually temper one another with regards to their hegemonic temptations*. In fact, if it is true that the past cannot be prised away from places – that is to say, away from the dwelling “stories” of someone’s embodied activity within particular spaces, as engaged with particular objects, environments, and other people – this connection must also be true with respect ‘both to the past that can be recounted as a part of a personal biography and to the past that is articulated through communal narrative and history’ (Malpas, 2004: 177) – neither, it must be added, ‘wholly independent of the other’ (180). This is to say that when we take places into account, we must begin by understanding

that they are indicative of many crossovers between space and time: time is spatialized, materialized, anchored and kept by objects, places and environments, such that it is possible to recover the past in embodied, shared ways (more or less familiar, more or less uncanny) of dwelling; and space, on the other hand is *memorialised*, densified, and *dimensionalised* in many layers of present, past and future actions, in this way becoming the possibility of dwelling that defines the human condition.

What must be added to this perspective is – as Ricoeur suggests – an extension of the idea of emplaced dwelling “to the level of the *oikoumene*”. In my view, this requires a development of the idea of *home* that is robust enough to allow “birth” and “hope” to *riposte* to Heidegger’s “being-towards-death”. From a spatial perspective, I find a first inspiration for this in Bachelard’s topoanalysis of the poetic image of inhabited spaces. As he develops this perspective, Bachelard notes that a home is ‘our first world’ (Bachelard, 1964: 4). Those who posit the universe as existing prior to the house *qua* home are therefore wrong. It is impossible, according to Bachelard, to know the universe before we know the “house”, and this means that we cannot truly know our world independently of a primordial sense of being at home. In a way, before being-towards-death we are *born at home*, and this is why we will never forget, as human beings, the constitutive archaic sense of the degree of intimacy and intensity that goes along with any experience of being in the world. If this is so, then it becomes necessary to understand that, ‘rather than claim[ing] that the world is a house’, Bachelard’s perspective ‘tries to convince us that *the house is a world*. It is a place-world, a world of places’ (Casey, 1997: 291) where time takes place in the inhabited house-world.

Regarding time, it is then important to underscore that memory on the one hand, and the care and depth that must nourish historical interpretations on the other, is partially lost, or at least damagingly blocked, if we lose sight of what only in and by the embodied, spatial, environmental or – to sum it all up – *homely dimensions of existence* can somehow be regained as a familiar (even if never lived by me) *presence*.

#### **4. Exit**

A sense of the past is possible because we can become attached to what – at any time – wraps us up into its space by touching us almost physically. This is what can assure us that, as Ricoeur would say, memory can never be reduced to a 'simple region of historical science' (Ricoeur, 2004: 351), as if history itself were not rooted in a *mémoire vivante*. At the same time, it is also what can assure us that an *emplaced* ground of time – not one of simple commemorative sites, but one densified by objects, buildings, streets, ruins, atmospheres, and landscapes that carry within them the accumulated history of ancient labours and duties, of communities with their hopes, choices and decisions, of political and social experiences, of suffering and death – will always help history to critically balance the traces and testimonies of the past.

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